

INTRODUCTION

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN



The Mississippi River is one of America's most important natural and cultural resources. From its headwaters at Itasca Lake in Minnesota, this mighty river runs for 2,350 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, representing the third largest drainage basin in the world. The waters of more than 30 states contribute the river's flow, draining 40 percent of the United States. These waters provide a wide range of unique aquatic habitats for hundreds of different fish and mussel species. The river's flood plain is home to an immense variety of wildlife and serves as the primary flyway for more than 40 percent of the nation's migratory waterfowl.



Today, the "Mighty Mississippi" is used by humans in many ways, ranging from recreational activities such as fishing and boating to more commercial applications such as transportation, drinking water, crop irrigation and receiving waters for municipal and industrial effluents. More than 12 million people live in communities that border the river.

The river offers a rich and varied history that is often tied to its role as a primary route for commerce. The river has witnessed the rise and fall of the great mound building societies of early American Indian cultures. The river played a critical role in the settlement of early America as pioneers pushed towards the west and trade routes were established. During the Civil War the river was turned into a battleground between the North



and South, reflecting its strategic importance. The steamboat era arose on her waters as goods and people were transported up and down the river, promoting the development of many of America's great cities along the river's edge. Today the river is as important as ever, as a transportation route for various raw materials and goods. The river serves as a drinking water source for more than 18 million people living in the Mississippi River basin. The river generates close to \$2 million dollars in commercial fishing activity and more than \$1.2 billion in recreational activities.

Regretfully, the river has also served as a dumping ground for solid waste in the form of old tires, appliances, bottles, drums and other miscellaneous trash. Other less obvious forms of pollution also affect the river such as sewage, detergents, fertilizers, pesticides, toxic chemicals, and automotive oils. The river is also affected by alterations in temperature and turbidity.

Historically, access to clean water has been pivotal in the establishment of human societies. Today water is still a precious commodity that influences the success of modern communities. As part of the hydrologic cycle, water moves through the atmosphere and is redeposited on earth. However, no new water is being created, emphasizing the importance of how we use our river's resources. In the modern world we all live downstream of other water users.

